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THE ORIGIN OF TOTEMISM

By A. A. GOLDENWEISER

IT is now almost half a century since McLennan launched the conception of totemism on what proved to be a most spectacular ethnological career. And throughout that period, with scarcely any interruptions, the problem of the origin of totemism remained the most popular, as well as the most abused, of all totemic questions. I need scarcely add that new theories continue to appear at an alarming rate and that the fight over them rages as furiously as ever.

Many of the theories advanced were good, in the sense that they indicated a plausible starting point for the totemic process; all the theories were bad in so far as they pretended to have revealed the one and only starting-point of totemism. Hill-Tout regarded the religious aspect of the totem as the trait it had in common with the individual guardian spirit and the animal protector of a religious society; but he also held this religious element to be the only constant feature of totemism, and sought the origin of the institution in the individual guardian spirit. He succeeded in making out a fairly good case for his theory in so far as it referred to the *suliaism* of the Salish tribes of the interior of British Columbia. Haddon's hypothesis, also, need not be discarded as impossible, for among the Penobscot, according to Dr Speck's unpublished notes, there existed a regulation of hunting according to localities and animals, which approximated Haddon's idea of the origin of totemism. That animal taboos restricted to definite clans or localities should ever have been the first step in totemism, no one to my knowledge has maintained. Yet this hypothesis would have been as acceptable as any of the others. The prominence of the taboo aspect of totemism among many tribes of the African Bantu, especially, however, such features as the paternal taboo-totems of the Herero, Bawili, Tshi, and Bushongo, advances

the claim of the as yet unadvocated taboo-theory of the origin of totemism to a hearing on a par with other theories. To Frazer we owe at least three "origins." One was suggested by his studies in bush-souls. Spencer and Gillen's revelations about the magical ceremonies of the Aranda called forth another. The Aranda, again, with their curious beliefs about the conception of children, are responsible also for the third and last theory, the conceptional theory of the origin of totemism. The evidence accumulated since the magical ceremony theory first saw light did not serve to enhance its probability even with reference to the Aranda themselves. As to the bush-soul and the conceptional theories, they are variants of the view that derives clan totemism from spirits originally connected with individuals, whether as guardians or otherwise. Even in its general form, this view, as indicated elsewhere, is among the least plausible ones; while in the form of a bush-soul or of a conceptional theory, it becomes, in proportion to its particularizations, even less plausible. Then there is the late Andrew Lang's theory, which derives totemism from animal and plant names given to social groups, originally local aggregates, later clans. Animal names of groups of men are indeed so common a feature not alone in primitive society, and the presence of such names in totemic communities is such a persistent, although not universal, feature of the latter, that Lang's theory, although erroneous in its universalist pretensions, may perhaps be accorded a stronger claim to such universality than any of the other theories.

At this stage of the discussion it will be well to remember that when we speak of a particular feature as constituting the origin of totemism, all we may mean is that this particular feature appeared first in the social organization that later developed into a totemic complex. Totemic complexes could not have come into being full-grown and embracing a complicated set of religious, social, mythological, ceremonial, and artistic features. The features must have been acquired one by one; some, like the crest and rank qualities of the "totems" of British Columbia, bear unmistakable evidence of late origin, while of the features reviewed above each may have appeared before the others in a number of instances.

Apart from this chronological priority, no significance should be attached to the assertion that a certain feature was the origin of totemism. These origins are not embryonic totemic complexes which carry within them the potentialities of future development. Nor do they throw any light on the specific psychological conditions, the particular atmosphere of thought and emotion on the basis of which a totemic organization may spring up. The origins of Lang, Frazer, Haddon, and Hill-Tout are nothing but starting-points. And it goes without saying that the further piling up of hypothetical developmental stages in order to bridge the gap between the assumed origin and an actual live totemic complex is merely multiplying difficulties and depriving the hypothesis of that basis of probability which may often be granted to the "origin" itself, in the sense of a starting-point.

Without overstepping the bounds of well-ascertained ethnological and, we may add, historical facts, we may insist that the growth of a totemic community, like that of any other institution, depends on the coöperation of so many different agents, both "inner" and "outer," and is colored by so many unique, individual happenings, that any attempt to reconstruct the process on hypothetical foundations is nothing short of foolhardy.

Thus the question arises: Has the vast store of ingenuity exercised in the excogitation of these totemic origin theories, has the heavy labor of furnishing them with the necessary accessories of fact, analogy, and suggestion, been repaid by the results? No one who has followed totemic discussions for the last quarter of a century or so will hesitate to answer this question in the negative. Our comprehension of totemic phenomena has not been enhanced by these origin theories; at best they have proved of indirect value by stimulating totemic research. The futility of hunting for first origins, whether totemic or not, can best be realized if one imagines for a moment that all first origins of human institutions were revealed. They would no doubt present a sensational picture, full of local color and whimsicality, of improbabilities, and even of "impossibilities." But one may well doubt the scientific value of such a revelation. First origins are a matter of "chance," they

are unique individual events presenting at best a gossipy interest. The search for first origins, like the search of the alchemist, is vain.¹

Without challenging the above proposition that all hypothetical reconstructions of specific processes are futile, we may well ask whether some general and fundamental principle involved in all totemic processes could not be found. The discovery of such a principle would further our comprehension of totemic phenomena and supply a valuable guide for the study of those totemic processes which may still be available for first-hand research.

I propose in what follows to direct attention to the presence of such a principle. Let us remember that in all totemic communities we find a group differentiated into clans which display sets of totemic features different in specific content but homologous in form and function.² Can it be conceived that these features developed in the different clans independently? When one considers that the clans of a totemic organization are so interwoven as to constitute, to all appearance, an integral system; and that the homology of the clans is objectively, for the observer, as well as subjectively, for the totemite, the most patent fact about a totemic organization, one cannot but realize that any such series of independent developments lies entirely beyond the range of probability. But if the assumption of the independent development of totemic clan features is rejected, we must accept the only alternative assumption of a process of diffusion. On the other hand, the totemic features cannot be regarded as a contemporaneous growth;

¹ It will be noticed that throughout this discussion totemism was assumed to be of polygenetic origin. The reasons for this view have been presented elsewhere (see "Totemism, an Analytical Study," *Journal of American Folk-lore*, 1910, pp. 264 sq.). In an article on the origin of exogamy (*Archiv für Rechts- und Wirtschaftsphilosophie*, April, 1912), as well as in his recent *Die Elemente der Völkerpsychologie*, Wundt insists that the remarkable similarity of totemic phenomena all over the world, as disclosed particularly by Frazer's survey, inevitably leads to the assumption of an essential unity of totemic institutions. But this similarity may also be due to convergence under the directing influence of such a factor as the tendency for specific socialization (cf. my "Totemism and Exogamy defined: a Rejoinder," *American Anthropologist*, 1911, p. 596; and "Andrew Lang on Method in the Study of Totemism," *ibid.*, 1912, p. 384).

² "Andrew Lang on Method in the Study of Totemism," *American Anthropologist*, 1912, p. 384.

as regards the order of their appearance in a totemic complex, the features must be conceived of as a temporal series. Guided by these two assumptions, we may now visualize the totemic process at an extremely early stage of its growth. The tribe is differentiated into a number of social units or clans. The psychic atmosphere (Thurnwald's *Denkart*) is saturated with totemic possibilities.¹ The stage is set for a first origin of totemism. Most totemic origin theories may claim the right of supplying one, but it is not with them we are here concerned. The first origin—animal name, taboo, sacred animal, myth of descent—is assumed to have occurred in one, or in a few, of the clans. Still there is no totemism. But presently, with the psychological conditions remaining favorable, another clan adopts the feature. Then another, and another. Finally all the clans have it. The features in the various clans are not identical but they are equivalent, and they become specific clan characteristics,—become socialized. The totemic process has begun.² In the same way other features begin to develop. They may arise in one or another clan through "inner" growth, or they may come from the outside, through contact with other tribes. No sooner is a new feature evolved or adopted by a clan than it starts on its round of diffusion until all the clans have incorporated it. Thus the totemic organization grows and increases in complexity. Meanwhile, each feature in a clan stands for functional solidarity,

¹ A quarter of a century ago Andrew Lang pointed out that totemism must have arisen in a psychic atmosphere congenial to its inception and growth. In a paper read before the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Portsmouth, 1911; see abstract in *Man*, October, 1911) I referred to the analysis of the psycho-sociological conditions underlying totemism as the ultimate and most fundamental of totemic problems. The theoretical principles involved in all such problems were ably discussed by Lévy-Bruhl in *Les fonctions mentales des sociétés inférieures*, while a first constructive attempt in this direction, with reference to specifically totemic studies, was made by Thurnwald (see his "Die Denkart als Wurzel des Totemismus," *Korrespondenz-Blatt der deutschen Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, Bd. XLII, pp. 173-179).

² It must further be noted that the diffusion of the feature does not here proceed from individual to individual merely; which is, indeed, the way in which every custom spreads through a community. The individuals, to be sure, are the ultimate units to whom refer the functions for which the totemic features stand. But the diffusion of totemic features proceeds from clan to clan; and the individuals of each clan, when their turns arrive, do not adopt the feature itself but its homologue.

and as the number of features multiplies, the solidarity increases. On the other hand, the homology of the clans also gains in complexity and completeness, and the realization of such homology, at first no doubt unconscious, may tend to rise into the consciousness of the totemites. It need not be assumed that a new feature always appears in the same clan, but it does not seem improbable that such a tendency should develop. One or a few clans may thus assume the function of setting totemic fashion.¹

In the early days of a totemic complex the diffusion of a new feature throughout the clan system must be a slow process. But as each clan consolidates through the continuous superposition of common functions, and as the equivalence of the clans progresses with the addition of every new feature with reference to which the clans become homologous, this process of diffusion must become increasingly rapid and smooth. As feature upon feature springs up in one or another clan, their spread to other clans becomes a traditionally approved procedure, and the course and direction of the diffusion may also become fixed and stereotyped.²

¹ It ought to be possible, even at this late hour, to ascertain in how far this conception is justified by actual happenings in totemic communities.

² A reader conversant with the subject will probably have observed that the assumption of a pre-existing clan system at the inception of a totemic complex could not be justified on the same ground as the assumption of a first origin. The procedure is, indeed, artificial. For part at least of the totemic process may be conceived as antedating the formation of a hard-and-fast clan system, and having its source in the loose local organization out of which every clan system must have sprung. In the course of social evolution the transformation of such loose local groups into a clan system must have occurred innumerable times. With increasing solidarity the local groups would gradually assume the character of at first vague social units. Through intercourse and intermarriage between the groups, with or without exogamy, the individuals of the groups would become distributed in the different localities. Thus a foundation would be laid for a clan system, which in time would become fixed and rigid.

It is by no means improbable that in certain cases the totemic process began while the groups still had their original local character. The process, to be sure, must have been an exceedingly slow one. The multiplication of features; the consolidation of each group; the rise of a sense of equivalence between the groups,—these are aspects of the totemic process that could not find in local communities the material and spirit for totemic transformations, which are so plentifully supplied in a clan system. In the course, however, of the redistribution of the groups referred to above, the totemic features and tendencies may have proved powerful agents in furthering the differ-

The central point of the above theory of the origin of totemism lies in the conception that the building up of a totemic complex consists of a series of totemic features which appear one by one (or possibly in small groups), spread from clan to clan, become socialized in the clans and absorbed in the complex. Each new feature, on its appearance in a clan, becomes a pattern presently followed by other clans until the wave of diffusion has swept over them all. The theory may thus be fitly called *the pattern theory* of the origin of totemism. It may be regarded as a compromise between the views of those whose thirst for interpretations cannot be quenched by anything save a first origin, and the views of those who do not believe in any hypothetical reconstructions. Attempts at reconciliation by compromise are seldom successful in science, and the theory seems to be doomed to rejection by both camps. I may therefore be permitted to emphasize the two aspects of the theory which, to my mind, should commend it to the attention of totemizing ethnologists. Being convinced that the search for first origins is a vain pursuit, I eliminate from my theory all assumption as to the specific character of the first origin of a totemic complex. I simply assume one. The second important aspect of the theory is the conception of the waves of diffusion through which each new feature is assimilated by the complex. This conception is purely hypothetical, that is, it cannot be substantiated by anything we know as actually occurring in totemic complexes, but it is supported by what we know of the psychology of social processes. It seems, in fact, to formulate the only way in which a totemic complex can come into being.

The theory offers a ready explanation of various totemic "anomalies." When one finds that one totemic community has only animal totems and another only bird totems, the tendency is to look for deep-rooted causes. It cannot, of course, be denied that some

entiation and consolidation of clans; whereupon the process would assume the character outlined in the text. Moreover, the totemic processes, before and after the formation of a clan system, would not differ in principle but rather in the rapidity and smoothness of its development. This note may thus serve as an amplification of the theory propounded in the text, without, however, modifying the latter in any essential particular.

peculiarity in the environment or beliefs of the group may lead to such special developments. The explanation, however, may also lie in the fact that in one community a few animal names, adopted by several clans, fixed the pattern, which was followed by the other clans; while in another instance, the same occurred with bird names. In still other numerous instances the character of the names did not become stereotyped until some animal, bird, and plant names were taken, resulting in the distribution of names most frequently found in totemic communities. Double totems, as among the Baganda, or linked quadruple totems, as among the Massim of New Guinea, can be accounted for along the same lines. Not that the double or quadruple totems need be assumed to have constituted the primary condition in these communities. In the early stages of their development these totemic complexes may have had the normal one-clan one-totem aspect. But presently some unconventional "cause" doubled the totems in one or a few clans; other clans followed suit; and so on.

It will, I trust, be seen that the pattern theory may be regarded as a theory of the origin of totemism only in so far as it represents an attempt to suggest the mechanism of totemic processes, or what the boy Maxwell would have called "the particular go" of totemic complexes.

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